



Fixating the World's Most Caring Cornerstone: Heidegger on Self-Sacrifice

by Alin Cristian

Abstract

Prior to having its authenticity and transparency examined, the openness of human existence may be said to need preservation as is, regardless of its receptivity and responsiveness to the truth of Being. Paradoxically, in self-sacrifice the fulfilment of Dasein's ownmost potentiality-for-being is dependent upon a most radical disowning of itself. This investigation approaches self-sacrifice on the basis of its analogy with the creation of the work of art – as the peculiar fixation of the existing, already disclosed world of everydayness within Dasein's final absence. Finally, the suggestion is made that the incommensurable greatness of the heroic self-sacrifice needs to be itself preserved from the degradation brought about by massive and compulsive reproduction.

The Obstructing Openness of Dasein

Heidegger's emphasis on the necessity of extricating ourselves from the world of everydayness for the sake of a more authentic one has by now become a philosophical commonplace. Especially nowadays, a question deserving renewed attention is whether one can take for granted this disparaged world of everydayness as much as Heidegger does. He dwells at length on the issue of preserving the truth of Being from being obscured, although this may not always be the most immediate danger. Somewhat along Levinasian lines, it can be argued that, prior to having its authenticity and transparency examined, the openness of human existence needs preservation *as is* – that is, regardless of its receptivity and responsiveness to the truth of Being. In this sense, it emerges as most worthy of thinking that, in the midst of an obstinate silence of Being, Dasein sometimes chooses to step in, assume the latter's role and generously offer its very *there* to others. How does Heidegger's philosophy accommodate the disturbing fact that, even neglectful of Being, at times Dasein rushes to preserve the openness of just another entity

like itself at the cost of having to close its own?

Referring to the act of artistic creation, Heidegger points out that “the artist remains somewhat inconsequential as compared with the work, almost like a passageway that destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge” (1934-35/1994, p. 29). Self-sacrifice is precisely the case in which the destruction mentioned most literally takes place. This paper approaches it on the basis of its analogy with the creation of an artwork – or, more precisely, as the peculiar fixation [*Feststellung*] of the existing, already disclosed world of everydayness within Dasein's final absence. The peculiarity mentioned has to do with the discomfiting idea of making one's own death serviceable, of using it as a medium for the inscription of meaning – a phenomenon on the verge of trivialization in today's world. Self-sacrifice discloses a horizon of possibilities that, just like artistic creation, eventually acquires independence in relation to the agent's existence; for this reason, while distancing itself from the prudent action (which has the same mode of Being as its end) it remains caught up in an irreducible kinship with the production of

The *IPJP* is a joint project of the Humanities Faculty of the [University of Johannesburg](http://www.uj.ac.za) in South Africa and [Edith Cowan University's](http://www.edithcowan.edu.au) Faculty of Regional Professional Studies in Australia. This document is subject to copyright and may not be reproduced in whole or in part via any medium without the express permission of the publishers.

The *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* (*IPJP*) can be found at www.ipjp.org.

tools and artworks.

And yet, the acme of prudence is not intrinsically incompatible with the view that, in special circumstances, Dasein merely stands in the others' way toward the common good, not unlike a craftsman's experiment that, upon failing, starts to obstruct his *techne*. The act through which Dasein withdraws its ontic opaqueness into the ultimate background can, at the same time, be regarded as a donation to others of a more transparent version of the world. The latter can no longer be called Dasein's *own* in a strong sense, but turns out to have been co-owned all along. Dasein's very Being-in-the-world can be donated thanks to its essential transmissibility: it is only something most originally owned in common by its giver and receiver that can be transmitted, not something totally alien to the receiver; in the case of the contrary, the radical alterity of what is to be transmitted can never be reduced simply through reception.¹

Most importantly, on the point of abandoning its own capacity to act, Dasein "flirts" with infinitude: in a mimetic emulation of Being, it gives its Being-with [*Mitsein*] a basis, it literally *gives way* by offering its *there* to the relevant others as access to a good beyond its own reach, but possibly within theirs. The grammatical dative is misleading here: if Being-with constitutes Dasein's essential structure, it makes no sense to ask if this donation is addressed to itself or to others and as such to stress that in self-sacrifice Dasein does not, after all, *give itself* a foundation. One remembers that this tendency to impose a strong dichotomy upon the phenomenon has already been overcome through Heidegger's introduction of the concept of Being-with.

In order to understand the problems that self-sacrifice poses to Heidegger's ontology of finitude, one needs to begin by correctly situating this act within the heterogeneous field of human praxis as a whole. In this sense, it is useful to remember that the most consequential step of Heidegger's ontologizing reading of Aristotle consists in moving *phronesis* to the highest position in the place of *sophia* upon an analysis of the extent to which each of these practices

discloses its end.² For both thinkers, the highest ontological excellence is ascribable to that comportment which makes its own end most transparent.

My contention is that this ontologization of praxis reaches an inner limit when trying to grasp the essence of self-sacrifice, which in what follows stands for the deliberate actualization of Dasein's possibility of its impossibility. If, as Heidegger claims, Dasein is essentially a solicitous Being-towards-death, the act of dying for its meaningful others calls the primacy of *phronesis* into question. The challenger turns out to be *techne*, a type of comportment with which, as it will be argued here, the supreme sacrifice has a problematic connivance. When the community's only possibility of Being stands and falls with Dasein's demise, the latter may have to be understood by proceeding from the paradigm of *techne* – that is, as a failed experiment that, unless abandoned in due course, would threaten to lead the meaningful others into an existential dead-end.

The Ontologization of Aristotle's Theory of Praxis

Heidegger's interpretation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is based upon the thesis that, in the ancient Greeks' approach to human comportment, the primary issue was neither the basic convictions behind their actions, nor the practical success thereof, but rather the meaning of the human mode of Being (1924-25/1992a, p. 178). Starting already at the level of translation, this ontologization of Aristotle's practical philosophy purports to thematize for any given comportment the implicit situation that determines its end.

Regarding the capacity to make their own essence transparent, human comportments differ significantly from one another. Aristotle ranked them according to the excellence of the object they deal with, since, according to him, it is the object that each time elicits the specific type of behavioural disclosure wherein its essence emerges. Overall, Book VI(7) of the *Nicomachean Ethics* placed *sophia* highest because the unchanging was, in general, privileged by the Greek mind in its longing to share in the perfect Being of the contemplated first principles.

In Heidegger's ontologizing reading, *techne* stands for a mode of knowledge governing the possible becoming of man-made things. While the first

¹ It is according to this logic that one cannot regard one's own death as something givable or receivable: "Even if one gives me death to the extent that it means killing me, that death will still have been mine and as long as it is irreducibly mine I will not have received it from anyone else. Thus dying can never be taken, borrowed, transferred, delivered, promised, or transmitted" (Derrida, 1992/1995, p. 44).

² The term *ontologization* has long won acceptance among some Heidegger scholars (Kisiel, 1993, p. 146; Volpi, 1992, p. 106) though others prefer *essentialization* (Caputo, 1991, p. 32).

principles of natural entities lie within themselves, those of artifacts are situated somehow “next to” them [*para*] where this proximity is not to be taken spatially but ontologically, that is, as referring to the non-coincidence of two modes of Being. The final product of *techne* gets released into its autonomous mode of Being – “parallel to” that of its producer – only upon being completed, when it first really becomes what it is. In this sense, tools and artworks have in common their being independent of and situated “next to” the act of their production.

Unlike *techne*, *phronesis* always discloses its object in relation to the thinker’s mode of Being, which for Heidegger coincides with her very possibilities (1924-25/1992a, p. 58). Moreover, it does not flee the essential contingency in which the human mode of Being is caught, as *episteme* and *sophia* are said to do. As thoughtful openness toward the situation, it is deemed to reach deeper than both *episteme* focused on the unchanging and *techne* with its limited, somewhat accidental relation to its own end. The entity disclosed in it – the good end to pursue – has the same mode of Being as the disclosing act, as *phronesis* itself, since, in Aristotle’s view, “good action itself is its end” (1140, b7). This is to say that the good action does not stand “next to” the consideration of the good but, as the very end toward which this act of considering is directed, it represents the consummation of the prudent thinker’s effort to understand her acts, and thus herself. Such an understanding is a discursive disclosure of effective possibilities that first allows them to get underway toward actualization.

Heidegger’s interpretation of the term *logos* as Dasein’s available possibilities to make itself transparent departs from the traditional rendition of the concept as lawful disposition, or specifically human capacity of an animal, toward the idea of quest for access to Being. In this ontological sense, transparency is neither a quality attached to the act of seeing through, nor a matter seen, but rather the condition of possibility of access understood as available familiarity with what is thus accessed. This idea of possibility finds its limits in the specific experiences of the aporia, of the uncanny, of the alien and of the amazing, all of which manifest in various ways the end of Dasein’s familiarity with its world. Authentic appropriation of what initially resists all attempts to come to terms with it occurs when a new world is given to Dasein – a moment coinciding with a re-appropriation of the latter’s existence as a whole. According to Heidegger, the transparency belonging to this new world – that is, its practical intelligibility – is brought about by the moment of vision [*Augenblick*]

that may accompany Dasein’s resolve to face the anxiety-generating opaqueness of the limit.

From the authentic confrontation with what allows of no passage on familiar terms, Dasein may get the vision of a new world opening up to it; it may catch sight of an uncharted realm, the essential paths of which are supposed to become accessible to it in the vision itself. What interests us here in the first place is that, for Dasein, the reaching of its limits – experienced as cataclysm of its familiar world – although shattering its understanding, is said not to affect the *mineness* [*Jemeinigkeit*] of the new possibilities disclosed. However, it could be that, upon its anxiety-generating clash with the limit, not only Dasein’s understanding of the world expands beyond its previous limits, but also its understanding of ownership. In adopting a course of action that requires the agent to yield its very *there* to others, Dasein seems to bring to fulfilment its ownmost – that is, its solicitude [*Fürsorge*] for others – by paradoxically disowning itself in a most radical way.³

Through ontologization, praxis is entrusted to *logos* as the dimension in which the specifically human possibilities first come to be what they are upon prudent deliberation. For Heidegger, the superlative of being human can be reached only by questioning the ontological situation of one’s act with a view to rendering transparent its essential determinations. All the other kinds of praxis are seen as based upon an appropriation of specific possibilities always more originally disclosed by *phronesis*. An appropriation that does not essentially purport to call into question its ultimate grounds is *ipso facto* merely a form of actualization and hence, for humans, a lesser mode of Being. And yet, Heidegger designates self-sacrifice as the highest human act, despite the prudent deliberation that it does not so much silence as bring into focus the agent’s own freedom (in the sense of Emmanuel Levinas’s claim that “to receive the Other is to bring my own freedom into question” [1971, p. 84]).

Notwithstanding this, one should not too hastily rush to dissolve praxis into *logos*, for Heidegger stresses that “the *phronesis* is in the praxis even more than in *logos*” (1924-25/1992a, p. 138). Although somehow already accomplished in the preview [*Vorblick*] of the

³ Commenting on the same aspect of Heidegger’s philosophy, Derrida writes: “My own death becomes this irreplaceability that I must assume if I wish to have access to what is absolutely mine. My first and last responsibility, my first and last desire, is that responsibility of responsibility that relates me to what no one else can do in my place” (1992/1995, pp. 43-44).

action, the prudent act is, after all, said to come to its fulfilment in the actual performance. What exactly is then the relationship between an act's putative accomplishment in a preview and its full actualization?

Sheltering the World of Everydayness

Let us consider for a moment the unrelated [*unbezüglich*] character that the possibility of death is ascribed in *Being and Time*, since it appears to play an important yet ambiguous role in the individualization of Dasein. It is this possibility of death that, through its severing character, is credited with both extracting Dasein from its inauthentic relations to others and triggering the very opposite, that is, Dasein's solicitous turning toward others. On the one hand, the possibility of death "makes manifest that all Being-alongside the things with which we concern ourselves, and all *Being-with Others*, will fail us when our ownmost potentiality-for-Being is the issue" (1927/1962, p. 308, emphasis added). But, on the other hand, via Dasein's resolve the same possibility of death "pushes it [the Self] into solicitous Being with Others" (1927/1962, p. 344). In other words, a resolute facing of the possibility of death breaks and mends *with the same stroke* one of Dasein's existentials – its Being-with.

One cannot say that in anxiety Dasein simply continues to be its existentials while only the *existentiell* changes, for the proximity of death calls into question this very continuity. Too strong a distinction between a would-be intact continuity of the existentials and the changing *existentiell* would render death somewhat superfluous in contrast with a mode of Being credited with enduring unaffected in the proximity of the ultimate limit. Death threatens to become a mere accident for existence unless the very structure of the latter changes under that peculiar pressure exerted upon it by death in the form of anxiety. If, in the immediate proximity of its end, human existence already gets contaminated with the categorial and thus ceases to be just its possibilities, then resolve can be said to perform a de-structuring and re-structuring of Dasein's mode of Being.

Seven years after *Being and Time*, Heidegger started conceptualizing a rift [*Riß*] that not only sets itself forth into the Open (of which Dasein's understanding is only a moment) but also and especially establishes itself therein with the same gesture: "clearing of openness and establishment in the Open belong together" (1934-35/1964, p. 686). Of course, for the process of artistic creation this rift is expected to open in what is commonly called the materials of the artwork. But when Dasein experiences it *within its*

very being – that is, as a cleavage within its existential structure whereby the categorial springs forth – the work accomplished becomes a self-sacrifice. It is this rift that separates, within Dasein's embodied existence with others, those possibilities that are to remain open and continue making up a world from those that need to close for the sake of sheltering and sustaining the former.

As this veridical rift, actual death breaks into and contaminates Dasein's disclosed field of possibilities, thereby sealing some of them into a stiff, indubitable, compelling certainty that fixates and supports the remnant opening like a foundation. In the moment of vision, Dasein *both* "dies" through an actualization based on certainty *and* resumes its mode of Being its possibilities. This means that, in the proximity of actual death, its possibility always carries with it an urge to actualization that partly bereaves Dasein of its ontological status. Self-sacrifice is peculiar in that this urge protectively closes Dasein's opening around its meaningful others, thus leaving them as its *only* moment of openness.

The Heidegger of *Being and Time* reassures us that this disappropriation specific to anxiety remains only at the level of possibilities: "*The closest closeness which one may have in Being towards death as a possibility, is as far as possible from anything actual*" (1927/1962, pp. 306-307, original emphasis). This amounts to a restatement of the ontological difference between the full actuality of death and Dasein's mode of Being its possibilities. It grants the possible not only ontological primacy over the actual, but, in principle, also the power to challenge the necessity of taking action anytime by questioning the grounds of this action. *Anytime, except in the moment of vision.*

Heidegger would probably not deny that Dasein's capacity to step back from its actual involvements in the world in order to question their grounds is circumstantially restrained, albeit in principle unlimited. But at this point his ontology seems to abandon a bit too soon the difficult problem of the actualization already at work in and through the moment of vision, as well as the discussion of the mysterious force that vision possesses to bereave possibilities of their light, free-floating character and turn one of them compellingly into a stiff, because irrevocable, event. No sooner does *Being and Time* concede to the resolute Dasein the actuality of taking action than it devolves the whole problematic onto philosophical anthropology (1927/1962, p. 348). The moment of vision not only discloses a new world of possibilities, but imperatively inscribes it within the fullest actuality of a resolution in view of making it

last, of turning it into a reliable foundation.

This concern about the fixation [*Feststellung*] and preservation of the most insightful disclosure becomes a recurrent theme for Heidegger only later, as we will see shortly.⁴ An interruption of the endless procession of fleeting possibilities within Dasein's opening is thus performed in and through the moment of vision itself, which amounts to a suspension of all questioning that would threaten to trivialize its instituting gesture. But one should not forget that, for Heidegger, the *Augenblick* has no connotation of objective brevity, since it eludes the time measured by instruments (1929-1930/1992b, §33); as foundational insight, it can last whole years. Within given circumstances, Dasein's resolve to keep itself open through further inquiry may co-originally receive from Being itself an imperative to actualize a specific possibility first glimpsed at that very moment.

Manifested as necessity for Dasein to act, this eruption of Being into the realm of mere possibilities is only insufficiently dealt with in *Being and Time*. At this relatively early stage in Heidegger's thinking, the scrupulous precautions he takes confirm the tension between the actual pressure of necessity and Dasein's being merely its possibilities. Although expressly granted to the resolute act, actuality is allowed to appear only in quotation marks and only in a context where the primacy of the possible is restated: "Resolution does not withdraw itself from 'actuality', but discovers first what is factually possible" (1927/1962, p. 346). A couple of paragraphs further, Heidegger confesses his reluctance to speak of *taking action*, although through its resolve Dasein is said to be already taking action.

Notwithstanding these tensions, one thing seems to be beyond doubt: namely, that resolve, certainty of oneself and an action *other than thinking* all erupt into the realm of mere possibilities in the moment of vision. Upon experiencing anxiety, a certainty is reached, a rock bottom, an independent and self-contained "thingly moment" [*Dingheit*] impervious to any discursive opening. This interruption seizes upon a particular possibility and imperatively actualizes it into a foundation by burying the prudent questioning underneath, at least in the *Augenblick*. A genuine glimpse at the limit reverses, be it only for a moment, the primacy of the existential in favour of the categorial, in the mode of which Dasein reaches the (relative) certainty necessary for resolutely carrying out its action.

⁴ For an examination of other problems that the *Feststellung* poses to Heidegger's ontology, see Cristian, 1995.

Founding Upon a Human Absence

After *Being and Time*, the existentiell definiteness of Dasein's resolution gets more boldly articulated and illustrated through examples. Without misreading into such examples types of authentic action uprooted from their ontological situation, their simple enumeration in the text disguises a problematic prioritizing among them. It is my contention that the tip of this hierarchical pyramid of practices may actually pierce through the limits of an ontology of *finitude*. If Heidegger's political texts deserve serious philosophical reading, the claim that self-sacrifice is "*the greatest thing of which a human being is capable*" (Wolin, 1993, p. 40, original emphasis) threatens to compromise both the privilege of *phronesis* and the fundamental thesis of Dasein's finitude.

Heidegger's later essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art", lists some examples of founding acts presented as ways in which truth establishes itself in the entities opened up: the creation of the masterpiece, the establishment of the political state, the commerce with that unspecified entity characterized by fullest being, the thinker's questioning and, not least, the essential sacrifice [*wesentliche Opfer*] (1934-35/1994, p. 49). Remarkably, now the last two items in the series appear distinct from one another, thus dispelling the conceivable objection that the term *sacrificial offering* [*Opfer*] as used by Heidegger refers strictly to Dasein's thinking-as-action, not to a full-fledged action as such.

All the instituting gestures enumerated above expressly instigate within their respective objects the struggle between closure and disclosure, between an access-giving and an access-denying moment. In each case, the newly disclosed horizon of possibilities not just opens up, but also needs to be entrusted to, the specific entity it arose from, in order to rest on and be fixated within it. Rooted in its receptivity to the voice of Being, Dasein's creative genius is literally *instrumental* in bringing forth this new light and, simultaneously, in fixating it within the actuality that in each case hosted its advent – the artistic material of the masterpiece, the specific terms of the law, the ritual practices of a particular religion, the specifically articulated question, or Dasein's own impossibility. It is only through this act of fixation that the truth of Being becomes in principle available to everyone.

The argument advanced here relies upon the following analogy: the horizon of possibilities disclosed for others through Dasein's self-sacrifice is,

with regard to the self-closing Dasein, what the world of the artwork [*Welt*] is with respect to the self-secluding earth [*Erde*]. By *world* Heidegger designates “the ever-nonobjective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keep us transported into Being” (1934-35/1994, pp. 30-31). Opposed to a world’s arising, and at the same time united with it in an original struggle, stands the self-secluding *earth*, a moment defined as “that whence the arising brings back and shelters everything that arises as such” (1934-35/1994, p. 28). Short of being fixated in a particular entity, the possibilities that make up a world would remain fleeting, indistinct, chaotic, incongruent with one another – in one word, ungraspable, and as such merely haunting transmission, not actually being its object. Alone their inscription within a “thingly element” can bring them under a law and thus allow them to be (only) what they are.

Yet the “thingness” of *one’s death* does not go without saying. On the one hand, despite all attempts to bring it into light, death remains the most impenetrable mystery: the most irreversible, most inflexible, certain and, because of this, reliable event. Needless to mention how serviceable it turns out to be in stabilizing social unrest, establishing political domination, and even generating business. If the “thingly moment” constitutes the guarantor of lawfulness in the creation that it lodges, death can be credited with being *the law* par excellence. On the other hand, though, the insubstantiality of death makes us hesitate when designating it as a serviceable thing: it is, after all, nothing but absence, indeed, nothing through and through. What in its elusiveness resists being pinned down at the same time appears to be the condition of possibility of all fixity and rigor. Absence lets be what already is and does nothing but that; yet this letting be, by strictly preserving everything else, joins in the self-assertion of the very law governing entities – their Being.

In the 1943 “Postscript to ‘What is Metaphysics?’”, Heidegger’s questioning into the foundational nothing [*Nichts*] equated with Being culminates in the particular response given to it by the profoundly daring Dasein: a serene commitment to sacrifice itself after abandoning the prudent, calculative and, because of this, indefinitely hesitant deliberation. When the self-sacrificial act, seen as “the departure of a being on a march for the preservation of Being’s favour” (1943/1996, p. 310), gets authentically recognized as the due human response to the Inevitable, its recognition is curiously claimed to be accompanied by a calm assurance [*Gleichmut*], not prudent

suspicion. This commitment to redeem the dignity of Being has no specific end in view, as it allegedly stands in no need for results; hence, a prudent deliberation regarding it would simply not apply. Instead, the calm assurance of being in the right translates into insistence, intolerance toward calculations and, above all, courage for the “severing essence of every sacrifice” [*abschiedliche Wesen jedes Opfer*] (1943/1996, p. 311). This severing essence of sacrifice is another name for the rift that the artist was said to experience not directly in her own flesh but rather in the material of her work of art.

At this stage, Heidegger would want self-sacrifice to tolerate no petty calculations in terms of gain or loss, although, with regard to its given situation among beings, a finite Dasein can only manage an improvement within certain limits, not a radical change. Now Dasein’s ultimate good boldly emerges from uncertainty and circumspection into a clarity ascribed beyond doubt to the silent voice of Being: to prove itself a match to Being in the task of rescuing the latter’s dignity (1943/1996, p. 311).⁵ As for the actual capacity to assume such a lofty and demanding task, Heidegger admits our poverty, but immediately invests it with the nobleness of concealing a treasure. It is with this treasure that Dasein’s debt to Being can be settled, in the sense of Levinas’s claim that “the human being buys back [*rachète*] the creation” (1971, p. 107).

One notices that, in this discourse, it is no longer specific situations, practical issues that are negotiated, but rather status, dignity, favours, good will, nobleness, honour, gratitude – all symbolic values. To Being’s prodigal and obliging giving, the only suitable response is deemed to be Dasein’s equally prodigal expending of itself, untroubled by trivial concerns about more assessable goals.

In the moment of vision that brings about Dasein’s resolution to depart from the world in a radical way, what gets sacrificed in the first place is Dasein’s tendency further to question into the grounds of this resolution. Notwithstanding that, as Heidegger often reminds us, essential thinking is intrinsically a way of acting, inauthentic flight from one’s own conscience remains also conceivable in the way of a questioning extended beyond the opportune time of action. No matter how vigorously philosophical interrogation

⁵ This clarity of the voice of Being is due to the fact that it is not itself inscribed in any medium other than itself. It is mere presence of meaning in one’s consciousness or, as Derrida calls it, a “transcendental signifier”. For the problems it raises with regard to Heidegger’s ontology, see Derrida, 1967, pp. 33-39.

claims its belonging together with the enactment of self-sacrifice, their distinctness is always susceptible to confronting Dasein tragically, in the form of an uncompromising “either/or” choice. In other words, the veridical rift haunts thinking all along with its power to turn one specific possibility into effectively taken action and thus to set it apart from other, merely vacuous, possibilities.

One notices here a peculiarity specific to the act of giving oneself away: although, as a good act, it remains its own end, at the same time it is intended to become someone else’s. Or, put differently, while being its *own* end it actually remains open-ended due to its essentially transmissible ownership. Being *there* means, from this latter perspective, not only solicitously disclosing the common good along with and for others, but also and inevitably being *in the way of* the others’ pursuit of it. The gift of Being is in principle subject to a multiple claim; it is essentially “up for grabs” insofar as it has not been explicitly assigned to anyone (from *I am* it does not necessarily follow that my claim to this entity designated by the pronoun *I* is privileged over and above others’ claims). Hence, the individual’s access to it gets *both* obstructed *and* opened by the other’s existence. To be among others means to be in an uncertain position vis-à-vis the common good: the other’s presence can pave one’s way to it or stand in one’s way.⁶ Reciprocally, one’s own presence can open or close the others’ access to the common good.

Preserving the Heroic

If, within Dasein’s impossibility, a possibility for me is that its meaningful others can still be disclosed, it means that Dasein, apart from receiving its possibilities, also discovers itself capable of creating them out of and through its fully actualized annihilation. The important question in this regard is whether or not in this way it can be said to join in Being’s generous prodigality and higher dignity.

Maurice Blanchot notes that the subject who gives itself death is not the same as the one who receives it (1955, p. 131). And yet, when this act is performed out of care for others, its addressees cannot be

⁶ For this reason, Vogel’s claim that “my existence is rendered finite ... also by the way my possibilities are conditioned by the presence of others over whom I have the power of life-or-death” fails to convince (1994, p. 92). The problem is precisely that there is not a single way in which one is conditioned by the presence of others, and this is due to the essential ambiguity of their presence for me: they can be not only an obstacle in my way but also the receivers of my gift of pure opening.

considered alien either. In this form of transcendence, Dasein seems both to assume its finitude and to free itself from it. The certainty of itself that it reaches in the sacrificial resolution necessarily suspends the taking for granted of its own meaningful community. Or, what amounts to the same, Dasein gets certain of itself being always already claimed by a community whose very possibility of Being does not go without saying but may have to be won through and out of that Dasein’s very impossibility.

The idea of Dasein’s being essentially a receiver, not a giver, of its own foundation is convincingly elaborated in §58 of *Being and Time* under the name of debt [*Schuld*]. For an ontology of finitude, Dasein’s debt cannot even in principle be paid back: “The Self, which as such has to lay the basis for itself, can *never* get that basis into its power” (1927/1962, p. 330). It is on this *never* emphasized by Heidegger that the finitude of Dasein is founded. However, notwithstanding that it cannot get this basis into its power, through self-sacrifice Dasein discovers at least the power to join in Being’s donation. If Dasein receives everything only in the name of others, if its very ownership of everything it owns becomes an issue, then giving “itself” the foundation by offering its meaningful others its very *there* seems to challenge the postulate of finitude.⁷

The question that Dasein, if confined to its finitude, cannot raise is whether sacrificing its given possibility of questioning for the sake of offering it to its basis (its community) does not surpass in excellence the cultivation of prudence. Taking into account that, in the precariousness of social existence, the others remain eternally open – according to Levinas, all too open – to receive Dasein’s sacrifice, one has to decide first if *this* openness does not take precedence over a discursive one. The ultimate consecration of care might have to be entrusted to contingency, to a moment of carelessness that escapes the economy of prudence and elicits Dasein’s availability for the sacred in the form of a sacrifice [*sacrum facere*].

This *facere*, as the making of a categorial out of an existential structure, ultimately pertains to *techne*, not to *phronesis*. Prior to listening to the silent voice of Being and protecting the latter’s dignity through a grandiose yet somewhat vacuous commitment, it

⁷ Derrida points out that there is “a structural disproportion or dissymmetry between the finite and responsible mortal on the one hand and the goodness of the infinite gift, on the other hand” (1992/1995, p. 51). Yet, when this finite mortal becomes itself the giver of the infinite gift, it is questionable whether its finitude remains, indeed, intact or gets affected by the ontological status of the gift.

requires Dasein to regard itself more humbly, as just one removable element of the situation suspect of obstructing the meaningful others' access to the common good. The idea that the others are, for Dasein, an innermost opening *in need of preservation prior to any inquiry into its Being* is not meant to dissolve the ontological into the ethical, but to point out that a commitment to finitude might in fact stand in the way of their equitable dialogue.

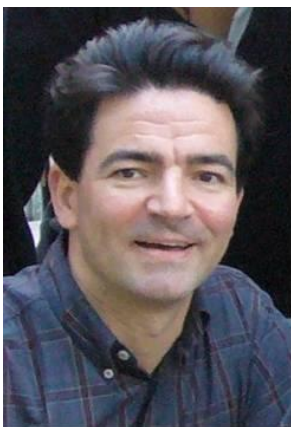
The problem with relegating self-sacrifice to an ethical system is that it threatens to trivialize the terrifying splendour of its unique radiance into a horrific routine, for this practice remains, essentially, a *techne*. One is overwhelmed by the existential stature of a soldier who gave his life to save that of his comrades, or of an old professor who died shielding his young students from death. The blinding, abrasive light of the truth captured by these gestures and fixated atop the arch separating beings from nothingness keeps beaconing unobtrusively through our everyday confusion. It is simply there, far away and above us, lighthouse of an uncharted shore. But the mass-production of this luminous rift within the continuum of human life, the calculated ideological pressure put on individuals to rip themselves open in search of courage's "raw Being" horrifies. The unique greatness of the heroic self-sacrifice is dwarfed precisely to the extent to which a community's need for its repetition is vehemently voiced.

Ultimately, does self-sacrifice come closer to a piece of ordinary, ideologically devised equipment for symbolizing, or to a sublime work of art? Heidegger reminds us that, when completed, equipment completely disappears in its use: the perfect tool is the one that never draws the user's attention toward it but

stays all the more serviceable the more neglected it gets. In the mode of Being of equipment, the material is used up insofar as it sinks without remainder into inconspicuousness. Not so for the work of art, in which, through the creative process, the earth first gets moved into the opening of the world and kept conspicuously there. In a masterpiece, "the earth is not simply the Closed but rather that which rises up as self-closing" (1934-35/1994, p. 42). This idea of rising up as self-closing acquires a particular weight when the material in case is a human being's absence. For how can an absence be said to rise up and stand out as such?

In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin brings into question the quality of a presence and signals the degradation to which the quality of artworks is subject through their being reproduced (1936/1968, p. 221). By analogy, one can perhaps think here of the quality of that absence left behind through self-sacrifice and of its degradation through massive reproduction. This suggests that the loftiest in human existence can neither be taught, nor learned through imitation, and that the surest way to compromise its value is to found a school thereof. Conversely, letting an incommensurably great act be what it is without degrading it through massive and compulsive reproduction constitutes in fact its discrete preservation, not neglect. For Heidegger, even when separated by the veil of the present, creators and preservers remain most intimately bound together in the work: "Just as a work cannot be without being created but is essentially in need of creators, so what is created cannot itself come into being without those who preserve it" (1934-35/1994, p. 54).

About the Author



Alin Cristian holds a PhD in philosophy from The Catholic University of Leuven and specializes in 20th century Continental thought. Apart from essays in phenomenology, literature and cinema, he has published poetry and some translations from French. Lately, he has also focused on the geopolitics of education. He presently teaches at Chang Jung Christian University, Taiwan.

References

- Benjamin, W. (1968). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction (Harry Zohn, Trans.). In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations: Essays and reflections* (pp. 217-251). New York: Schocken Books. (Original work published in German in 1936 and first translated into English in 1968)
- Blanchot, M. (1955). *L'espace littéraire*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Caputo, J. D. (1991). Incarnation and essentialization: A reading of Heidegger. *Philosophy Today*, 35, 32-42.
- Cristian, A. (1995). Zarathustra's dance: A Heideggerian mistep? *Man and World*, 28, 145-162.
- Derrida, J. (1967). *De la grammatologie*. Paris: Minuit.
- Derrida, J. (1995). *The gift of death* (D. Willis, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1992)
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row. (Original work published 1927)
- Heidegger, M. (1964). The origin of the work of art (Albert Hofstadter, Trans.). In Albert Hofstadter & Richard Kuhns (Eds.), *Philosophies of art and beauty: Selected readings in aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger* (pp. 647-701). New York: Modern Library. (Original work published 1934-1935)
- Heidegger, M. (1992a). *Platon: Sophistes*. In I. Schlüsser (Vol. Ed.), *Gesamtausgabe: Vol. 19* (pp. 559-577). Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann. (Original work published 1924-1925)
- Heidegger, M. (1992b). *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt, Endlichkeit, Einsamkeit*. In F.-W. von Herrmann (Vol. Ed.), *Gesamtausgabe: Vols. 29-30*. Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann. (Original work published 1929-1930)
- Heidegger, M. (1994). Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes. In F.-W. von Herrmann, (Ed.), *Holzwege. Gesamtausgabe: Vol. 5* (pp. 1-74). Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann. (Original work published 1934-1935)
- Heidegger, M. (1996). Nachwort zu "Was ist Metaphysik?". In F.-W. von Herrmann (Ed.), *Wegmarken. Gesamtausgabe: Vol. 9* (pp. 303-312). Frankfurt/Main: V. Klostermann. (Original work published 1943)
- Kiesel, T. (1993). *The genesis of Being and Time*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Levinas, E. (1971). *Totalité et infini*. Paris: Kluwer Academic.
- McKeon, R. (Ed.). (1941). *The basic works of Aristotle*. New York: Random House.
- Vogel, L. (1994). *The fragile "we": Ethical implications of Heidegger's Being and Time*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Volpi, F. (1992). Dasein as praxis: The Heideggerian assimilation and radicalization of the practical philosophy of Aristotle. In C. Macann (Ed.), *Martin Heidegger: Critical assessments* (Vol. 2, pp. 90-129). London: Routledge.
- Wolin, R. (Ed.). (1993). *The Heidegger controversy: A critical reader*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.